

Gibberby Edition

**THE WRITINGS OF
JOHN BURROUGHS**

WITH PORTRAITS AND MANY ILLUSTRATIONS

VOLUME IX





THE WRITINGS
OF
JOHN BURROUGHS
IN
RIVERBY



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By John Burroughs

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PREFATORY NOTE

I HAVE often said to myself, "Why should not one name his books as he names his children, arbitrarily, and let the name come to mean much or little, as the case may be?" In the case of the present volume — probably my last collection of Out-of-door Papers — I have taken this course, and have given to the book the name of my place here on the Hudson, "Riverby," — by the river, — where the sketches were written, and where for so many years I have been an interested spectator of the life of nature, as, with the changing seasons, it has ebbed and flowed past my door.

J. B.

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I

AMONG THE WILD FLOWERS

I

NEARLY every season I make the acquaintance of one or more new flowers. It takes years to exhaust the botanical treasures of any one considerable neighborhood, unless one makes a dead set at it, like an herbalist. One likes to have his floral acquaintances come to him easily and naturally, like his other friends. Some pleasant occasion should bring you together. You meet in a walk, or touch elbows on a picnic under a tree, or get acquainted on a fishing or camping-out expedition. What comes to you in the way of birds or flowers, while wooing only the large spirit of open-air nature, seems like special good fortune. At any rate, one does not want to bolt his botany, but rather to prolong the course. One likes to have something in reserve, something to be on the lookout for on his walks. I have never yet found the orchid called calypso, a large, variegated purple and yellow

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flower, Gray says, which grows in cold, wet woods and bogs, — very beautiful and very rare. Calypso, you know, was the nymph who fell in love with Ulysses and detained him seven years upon her island, and died of a broken heart after he left her. I have a keen desire to see her in her floral guise, reigning over some silent bog, or rising above the moss of some dark glen in the woods, and would gladly be the Ulysses to be detained at least a few hours by her.

I will describe her by the aid of Gray, so that if any of my readers come across her, they may know what a rarity they have found. She may be looked for in cold, mossy, boggy places in our northern woods. You will see a low flower, somewhat like a lady's-slipper, that is, with an inflated sac-shaped lip; the petals and sepals much alike, rising and spreading; the color mingled purple and yellow; the stem, or scape, from three to five inches high, with but one leaf, — that one thin and slightly heart-shaped, with a stem which starts from a solid bulb. That is the nymph of our boggy solitudes, waiting to break her heart for any adventurous hero who may penetrate her domain.

Several of our harmless little wild flowers have been absurdly named out of the old mythologies: thus, Indian cucumber root, one of Thoreau's favorite flowers, is named after the sorceress Medea, and is called "medeola," because it was at one time

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thought to possess rare medicinal properties; and medicine and sorcery have always been more or less confounded in the opinion of mankind. It is a pretty and decorative sort of plant, with, when perfect, two stages or platforms of leaves, one above the other. You see a whorl of five or six leaves, a foot or more from the ground, which seems to bear a standard with another whorl of three leaves at the top of it. The small, colorless, recurved flowers shoot out from above this top whorl. The whole expression of the plant is singularly slender and graceful. Sometimes, probably the first year, it only attains to the first circle of leaves. This is the platform from which it will rear its flower column the next year. Its white, tuberous root is crisp and tender, and leaves in the mouth distinctly the taste of cucumber. Whether or not the Indians used it as a relish as we do the cucumber, I do not know.

Still another pretty flower that perpetuates the name of a Grecian nymph, a flower that was a new find to me a few summers ago, is the arethusa. Arethusa was one of the nymphs who attended Diana, and was by that goddess turned into a fountain, that she might escape the god of the river, Alpheus, who became desperately in love with her on seeing her at her bath. Our Arethusa is one of the prettiest of the orchids, and has been pursued through many a marsh and quaking bog by her

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lovers. She is a bright pink-purple flower an inch or more long, with the odor of sweet violets. The sepals and petals rise up and arch over the column, which we may call the heart of the flower, as if shielding it. In Plymouth County, Massachusetts, where the *arethusa* seems common, I have heard it called Indian pink.

But I was going to recount my new finds. One sprang up in the footsteps of that destroying angel, Dynamite. A new railroad cut across my tramping-ground, with its hordes of Italian laborers and its mountains of giant-powder, was enough to banish all the gentler deities forever from the place. But it did not.

Scarcely had the earthquake passed when, walking at the base of a rocky cliff that had been partly blown away in the search for stone for two huge abutments that stood near by, I beheld the débris at the base of the cliff draped and festooned by one of our most beautiful foliage plants, and one I had long been on the lookout for, namely, the climbing fumitory. It was growing everywhere in the greatest profusion, affording, by its tenderness, delicacy, and grace, the most striking contrast to the destruction the black giant had wrought. The power that had smote the rock seemed to have called it into being. Probably the seeds had lain dormant in cracks and crevices for years, and when the catastrophe came, and they found themselves in new soil

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amid the wreck of the old order of things, they sprang into new life, and grew as if the world had been created anew for them, as in a sense it had. Certainly, they grew most luxuriantly, and never was the ruin wrought by powder veiled by more delicate, lace-like foliage.¹ The panicles of drooping, pale flesh-colored flowers heightened the effect of the whole. This plant is a regular climber; it has no extra appendages for that purpose, and does not wind, but climbs by means of its young leaf-stalks, which lay hold like tiny hands or hooks. The end of every branch is armed with a multitude of these baby hands. The flowers are pendent, and swing like ear jewels. They are slightly heart-shaped, and when examined closely, look like little pockets made of crumpled silk, nearly white on the inside or under side, and pale purple on the side toward the light, and shirred up at the bottom. And pockets they are in quite a literal sense, for, though they fade, they do not fall, but become pockets full of seeds. The fumitory is a perpetual bloomer from July till killed by the autumn frosts.

The closely allied species of this plant, the dicentra (Dutchman's breeches and squirrel corn), are much more common, and are among our prettiest spring flowers. I have an eye out for the white-

¹ Strange to say, the plant did not appear in that locality the next season, and has never appeared since. Perhaps it will take another dynamite earthquake to wake it up.

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hearts (related to the bleeding-hearts of the gardens, and absurdly called "Dutchman's breeches") the last week in April. It is a rock-loving plant, and springs up on the shelves of the ledges, or in the débris at their base, as if by magic. As soon as blood-root has begun to star the waste, stony places, and the first swallow has been heard in the sky, we are on the lookout for dicentra. The more northern species, called "squirrel corn" from the small golden tubers at its root, blooms in May, and has the fragrance of hyacinths. It does not affect the rocks, like all the other flowers of this family.

My second new acquaintance the same season was the showy lady's-slipper. Most of the floral ladies leave their slippers in swampy places in the woods; only the stemless one (*Cypripedium acaule*) leaves hers on dry ground before she reaches the swamp, commonly under evergreen trees, where the carpet of pine needles will not hurt her feet. But one may penetrate many wet, mucky places in the woods before he finds the prettiest of them all, the showy lady's-slipper, — the prettiest slipper, but the stoutest and coarsest plant; the flower large and very showy, white, tinged with purple in front; the stem two feet high, very leafy, and coarser than bear-weed. Report had come to me, through my botanizing neighbor, that in a certain quaking sphagnum bog in the woods the showy lady's-slipper could be

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found. The locality proved to be the marrowy grave of an extinct lake or black tarn. On the borders of it the white azalea was in bloom, fast fading. In the midst of it were spruces and black ash and giant ferns, and, low in the spongy, mossy bottom, the pitcher plant. The lady's-slipper grew in little groups and companies all about. Never have I beheld a prettier sight, — so gay, so festive, so holiday-looking. Were they so many gay bonnets rising above the foliage? or were they flocks of white doves with purple-stained breasts just lifting up their wings to take flight? or were they little fleets of fairy boats, with sail set, tossing on a mimic sea of wild, weedy growths? Such images throng the mind on recalling the scene, and only faintly hint its beauty and animation. The long, erect, white sepals do much to give the alert, tossing look which the flower wears. The dim light, too, of its secluded haunts, and its snowy purity and freshness, contribute to the impression it makes. The purple tinge is like a stain of wine which has slightly overflowed the brim of the inflated lip or sac and run part way down its snowy sides.

This lady's-slipper is one of the rarest and choicest of our wild flowers, and its haunts and its beauty are known only to the few. Those who have the secret guard it closely, lest their favorite be exterminated. A well-known botanist in one of the large New England cities told me that it was found in

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but one place in that neighborhood, and that the secret, so far as he knew, was known to but three persons, and was carefully kept by them.

A friend of mine, an enthusiast on orchids, came one June day a long way by rail to see this flower. I conducted him to the edge of the swamp, lifted up the branches as I would a curtain, and said, "There they are."

"Where?" said he, peering far into the dim recesses.

"Within six feet of you," I replied.

He narrowed his vision, and such an expression of surprise and delight as came over his face! A group of a dozen or more of the plants, some of them twin-flowered, were there almost within reach, the first he had ever seen, and his appreciation of the scene, visible in every look and gesture, was greatly satisfying. In the fall he came and moved a few of the plants to a tamarack swamp in his own vicinity, where they thrived and bloomed finely for a few years, and then for some unknown reason failed.

Nearly every June, my friend still comes to feast his eyes upon this queen of the cyripediums.

While returning from my first search for the lady's-slipper, my hat fairly brushed the nest of the red-eyed vireo, which was so cunningly concealed, such an open secret, in the dim, leafless underwoods, that I could but pause and regard it. It was suspended from the end of a small, curving sapling;

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was flecked here and there by some whitish substance, so as to blend it with the gray mottled boles of the trees; and, in the dimly lighted ground floor of the woods, was sure to escape any but the most prolonged scrutiny. A couple of large leaves formed a canopy above it. It was not so much hidden as it was rendered invisible by texture and position with reference to light and shade.

A few summers ago I struck a new and beautiful plant in the shape of a weed that had only recently appeared in that part of the country. I was walking through an August meadow when I saw, on a little knoll, a bit of most vivid orange, verging on a crimson. I knew of no flower of such a complexion frequenting such a place as that. On investigation, it proved to be a stranger. It had a rough, hairy, leafless stem about a foot high, surmounted by a corymbose cluster of flowers or flower-heads of dark vivid orange-color. The leaves were deeply notched and toothed, very bristly, and were pressed flat to the ground. The whole plant was a veritable Esau for hairs, and it seemed to lay hold upon the ground as if it was not going to let go easily. And what a fiery plume it had! The next day, in another field a mile away, I chanced upon more of the flowers. On making inquiry, I found that a small patch or colony of the plants had appeared that season, or had first been noticed then, in a meadow well known to me from boyhood. They had

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been cut down with the grass in early July, and the first week in August had shot up and bloomed again. I found the spot aflame with them. Their leaves covered every inch of the surface where they stood, and not a spear of grass grew there. They were taking slow but complete possession; they were devouring the meadow by inches. The plant seemed to be a species of *hieracium*, or hawkweed, or some closely allied species of the composite family, but I could not find it mentioned in our botanies.

A few days later, on the edge of an adjoining county ten miles distant, I found, probably, its headquarters. It had appeared there a few years before, and was thought to have escaped from some farmer's door-yard. Patches of it were appearing here and there in the fields, and the farmers were thoroughly alive to the danger, and were fighting it like fire. Its seeds are winged like those of the dandelion, and it sows itself far and near. It would be a beautiful acquisition to our midsummer fields, supplying a tint as brilliant as that given by the scarlet poppies to English grain-fields. But it would be an expensive one, as it usurps the land completely.¹

Parts of New England have already a midsummer flower nearly as brilliant, and probably far less ag-

¹ This observation was made ten years ago. I have since learned that the plant is *Hieracium aurantiacum* from Europe, a kind of hawkweed. It is fast becoming a common weed in New York and New England. (1894)

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sive and noxious, in meadow-beauty, or rhexia, sole northern genus of a family of tropical ts. I found it very abundant in August in the try bordering on Buzzard's Bay. It was a new er to me, and I was puzzled to make it out. emed like some sort of scarlet evening primrose. parts were in fours, the petals slightly heart- ed and convoluted in the bud, the leaves ly, the calyx-tube prolonged; but the stem square, the leaves opposite, and the tube urn- ed. The flowers were an inch across, and nt purple. It grew in large patches in dry, y fields, making the desert gay with color; also on the edges of marshy places. It eclipses flower of the open fields known to me farther nd. When we come to improve our wild gar- as recommended by Mr. Robinson in his book wild gardening, we must not forget the rhexia. ur seacoast flowers are probably more brilliant olor than the same flowers in the interior. I ght the wild rose on the Massachusetts coast er tinted and more fragrant than those I was to. The steeple-bush, or hardhack, had more r, as had the rose gerardia and several other ts.

ut when vivid color is wanted, what can surpass qual our cardinal-flower? There is a glow about flower as if color emanated from it as from a coal. The eye is baffled, and does not seem to

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reach the surface of the petal; it does not see the texture or material part as it does in other flowers, but rests in a steady, still radiance. It is not so much something colored as it is color itself. And then the moist, cool, shady places it affects, usually where it has no floral rivals, and where the large, dark shadows need just such a dab of fire! Often, too, we see it double, its reflected image in some dark pool heightening its effect. I never have found it with its only rival in color, the monarda or bee-balm, a species of mint. Farther north, the cardinal-flower seems to fail, and the monarda takes its place, growing in similar localities. One may see it about a mountain spring, or along a meadow brook, or glowing in the shade around the head of a wild mountain lake. It stands up two feet high or more, and the flowers show like a broad scarlet cap.

The only thing I have seen in this country that calls to mind the green grain-fields of Britain splashed with scarlet poppies may be witnessed in August in the marshes of the lower Hudson, when the broad sedgy and flaggy spaces are sprinkled with the great marsh-mallow. It is a most pleasing spectacle, — level stretches of dark green flag or waving marsh-grass kindled on every square yard by these bright pink blossoms, like great burning coals fanned in the breeze. The mallow is not so deeply colored as the poppy, but it is much larger, and has the tint

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of youth and happiness. It is an immigrant from Europe, but it is making itself thoroughly at home in our great river meadows.

The same day your eye is attracted by the mallows, as your train skirts or cuts through the broad marshes, it will revel with delight in the masses of fresh bright color afforded by the purple loosestrife, which grows in similar localities, and shows here and there like purple bonfires. It is a tall plant, grows in dense masses, and affords a most striking border to the broad spaces dotted with the mallow. It, too, came to us from over seas, and first appeared along the Wallkill, many years ago. It used to be thought by the farmers in that vicinity that its seed was first brought in wool imported to this country from Australia, and washed in the Wallkill at Walden, where there was a woolen factory. This is not probable, as it is a European species, and I should sooner think it had escaped from cultivation. If one were to act upon the suggestions of Robinson's "Wild Garden," already alluded to, he would gather the seeds of these plants and sow them in the marshes and along the sluggish inland streams, till the banks of all our rivers were gay with these brilliant exotics.

Among our native plants, the one that takes broad marshes to itself and presents vast sheets of color is the marsh milkweed, far less brilliant than the loosestrife or the mallow, still a missionary in

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the wilderness, lighting up many waste places with its humbler tints of purple.

One sometimes seems to discover a familiar wild flower anew by coming upon it in some peculiar and striking situation. Our columbine is at all times and in all places one of the most exquisitely beautiful of flowers ; yet one spring day, when I saw it growing out of a small seam on the face of a great lichen-covered wall of rock, where no soil or mould was visible, — a jet of foliage and color shooting out of a black line on the face of a perpendicular mountain wall and rising up like a tiny fountain, its drops turning to flame-colored jewels that hung and danced in the air against the gray rocky surface, — its beauty became something magical and audacious. On little narrow shelves in the rocky wall the corydalis was blooming, and among the loose boulders at its base the blood-root shone conspicuous, suggesting snow rather than anything more sanguine.

Certain flowers one makes special expeditions for every season. They are limited in their ranges, and must generally be sought for in particular haunts. How many excursions to the woods does the delicious trailing arbutus give rise to ! How can one let the spring go by without gathering it himself when it hides in the moss ! There are arbutus days in one's calendar, days when the trailing flower fairly calls him to the woods. With me,

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come the latter part of April. The grass is
growing here and there on the moist slopes and by
the spring runs ; the first furrow has been struck
by the farmer ; the liver-leaf is in the height of its
greenness, and the bright constellations of the blood-
red flowers shine out here and there ; one has had his first
taste and his second taste of the spring and of the
flowers, and his tongue is sharpened rather than
blunted. Now he will take the most delicious and
refreshing draught of all, the very essence and soul
of the early season, of the tender brooding days,
in all their prophecies and awakenings, in the
fragrance of trailing arbutus which he gathers in his
walk. At the mere thought of it, one sees the sun-
flowers flooding the woods, smells the warm earthy
odors which the heat liberates from beneath the dry
leaves, hears the mellow bass of the first bumble-

“Rover of the underwoods,”

the finer chord of the adventurous honey-bee
seeking store for his empty comb. The arriving
warblers twitter above the woods ; the first che-
er rustles the dry leaves ; the northward-bound
thrushes, the hermit and the gray-checked, flit here
and there before you. The robin, the sparrow, and
the bluebird are building their first nests, and the
fisher are making their way slowly up the Hud-
son. Indeed, the season is fairly under way when

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the trailing arbutus comes. Now look out for troops of boys and girls going to the woods to gather it! and let them look out that in their greed they do not exterminate it. Within reach of our large towns, the choicer spring wild flowers are hunted mercilessly. Every fresh party from town raids them as if bent upon their destruction. One day, about ten miles from one of our Hudson River cities, there got into the train six young women loaded down with vast sheaves and bundles of trailing arbutus. Each one of them had enough for forty. They had apparently made a clean sweep of the woods. It was a pretty sight, — the pink and white of the girls and the pink and white of the flowers! and the car, too, was suddenly filled with perfume, — the breath of spring loaded the air; but I thought it a pity to ravish the woods in that way. The next party was probably equally greedy, and, because a handful was desirable, thought an armful proportionately so; till, by and by, the flower will be driven from those woods.

Another flower that one makes special excursions for is the pond-lily. The pond-lily is a star, and easily takes the first place among lilies; and the expeditions to her haunts, and the gathering her where she rocks upon the dark secluded waters of some pool or lakelet, are the crown and summit of the floral expeditions of summer. It is the expedition about which more things gather than almost

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any other: you want your boat, you want your lunch, you want your friend or friends with you. You are going to put in the greater part of the day; you are going to picnic in the woods, and indulge in a "green thought in a green shade." When my friend and I go for pond-lilies, we have to traverse a distance of three miles with our boat in a wagon. The road is what is called a "back road," and leads through woods most of the way. Black Pond, where the lilies grow, lies about one hundred feet higher than the Hudson, from which it is separated by a range of rather bold wooded heights, one of which might well be called Mount Hymettus, for I have found a great deal of wild honey in the forest that covers it. The stream which flows out of the pond takes a northward course for two or three miles, till it finds an opening through the rocky hills, when it makes rapidly for the Hudson. Its career all the way from the lake is a series of alternating pools and cascades. Now a long, deep, level stretch, where the perch and the bass and the pickerel lurk, and where the willow-herb and the royal osmunda fern line the shores; then a sudden leap of eight, ten, or fifteen feet down rocks to another level stretch, where the water again loiters and suns itself; and so on through its adventurous course till the hills are cleared and the river is in sight. Our road leads us along this stream, across its rude bridges, through dark hemlock and pine woods,

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under gray, rocky walls, now past a black pool, then within sight or hearing of a foaming rapid or fall, till we strike the outlet of the long level that leads to the lake. In this we launch our boat and paddle slowly upward over its dark surface, now pushing our way through half-submerged treetops, then ducking under the trunk of an overturned tree which bridges the stream and makes a convenient way for the squirrels and wood-mice, or else forcing the boat over it when it is sunk a few inches below the surface. We are traversing what was once a continuation of the lake; the forest floor is as level as the water and but a few inches above it, even in summer; it sweeps back a half mile or more, densely covered with black ash, red maple, and other deciduous trees, to the foot of the rocky hills which shut us in. What glimpses we get, as we steal along, into the heart of the rank, dense, silent woods! I carry in my eye yet the vision I had, on one occasion, of a solitary meadow lily hanging like a fairy bell there at the end of a chance opening, where a ray of sunlight fell full upon it, and brought out its brilliant orange against the dark green background. It appeared to be the only bit of bright color in all the woods. Then the song of a single hermit thrush immediately after did even more for the ear than the lily did for the eye. Presently the swamp sparrow, one of the rarest of the sparrows, was seen and heard; and that nest there

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in a small bough a few feet over the water proves to be hers, — in appearance a ground-bird's nest in a bough, with the same four speckled eggs. As we come in sight of the lilies, where they cover the water at the outlet of the lake, a brisk gust of wind, as if it had been waiting to surprise us, sweeps down and causes every leaf to leap from the water and show its pink under side. Was it a fluttering of hundreds of wings, or the clapping of a multitude of hands? But there rocked the lilies with their golden hearts open to the sun, and their tender white petals as fresh as crystals of snow. What a queenly flower, indeed, the type of unsullied purity and sweetness! Its root, like a black, corrugated, ugly reptile, clinging to the slime, but its flower in purity and whiteness like a star. There is something very pretty in the closed bud making its way up through the water to meet the sun; and there is something touching in the flower closing itself up again after its brief career, and slowly burying itself beneath the dark wave. One almost fancies a sad, regretful look in it as the stem draws it downward to mature its seed on the sunless bottom. The pond-lily is a flower of the morning; it closes a little after noon; but after you have plucked it and carried it home, it still feels the call of the morning sun, and will open to him, if you give it a good chance. Coil their stems up in the grass on the lawn, where the sun's rays can reach them.

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that is, if you are lucky enough to find it. It is rather a shy flower, and is not found in every wood. One day we went up and down through the woods looking for it, — woods of mingled oak, chestnut, pine, and hemlock, — and were about giving it up when suddenly we came upon a gay company of them beside an old wood-road. It was as if a flock of small rose-purple butterflies had alighted there on the ground before us. The whole plant has a singularly fresh and tender aspect. Its foliage is of a slightly purple tinge, and of very delicate texture. Not the least interesting feature about the plant is the concealed fertile flower which it bears on a subterranean shoot, keeping, as it were, one flower for beauty and one for use.

II

In our walks we note the most showy and beautiful flowers, but not always the most interesting. Who, for instance, pauses to consider that early species of everlasting, commonly called mouse-ear, that grows nearly everywhere by the roadside or about poor fields? It begins to be noticeable in May, its whitish downy appearance, its groups of slender stalks crowned with a corymb of paper-like buds, contrasting it with the fresh green of surrounding grass or weeds. It is a member of a very large family, the *Compositæ*, and does not attract one by its beauty; but it is interesting because of

The Study in Midsummer



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its many curious traits and habits. For instance, it is dicecious, that is, the two sexes are represented by separate plants; and, what is more curious, these plants are usually found separated from each other in well-defined groups, like the men and women in an old-fashioned country church, — always in groups; here a group of females, there, a few yards away, a group of males. The females may be known by their more slender and graceful appearance, and, as the season advances, by their outstripping the males in growth. Indeed, they become real amazons in comparison with their brothers. The staminate or male plants grow but a few inches high; the heads are round, and have a more dusky or freckled appearance than do the pistillate; and as soon as they have shed their pollen their work is done, they are of no further use, and by the middle of May, or before, their heads droop, their stalks wither, and their general collapse sets in. Then the other sex, or pistillate plants, seem to have taken a new lease of life; they wax strong, they shoot up with the growing grass and keep their heads above it; they are alert and active; they bend in the breeze; their long, tapering flower-heads take on a tinge of color, and life seems full of purpose and enjoyment with them. I have discovered, too, that they are real sun-worshipers; that they turn their faces to the east in the morning, and follow the sun in his course across the sky till they all bend to the west at his